

WHAT CANON LAW TAUGHT ME ABOUT TEEN DATING

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Editorial Comment: A Roman Catholic author offers some useful insights on this contemporary subject. Remember: we Orthodox are the true Catholics.

There is a growing debate within Catholic circles surrounding the merits of courtship as opposed to dating. As the youngest canon lawyer in North America, I am less than a decade removed from my teenage years, and I also served as a canonical adviser to various adolescent-orientated Catholic apostolates. Therefore, I keep in touch with what is current among today's youth. Yet I am also experienced with marriage tribunal ministry, where I regularly encounter broken marriages.

My experiences with canon law and teenagers have taught me a thing or two about what constitutes unhealthy teenage dating behavior, as well as what type of courtship leads to healthy marriages. Allow me to share this advice with teenagers and parents whose teenagers are of courting age.

Do Not Date

Don't date. This will seem like rather strange advice, given the fact this reflection is about teenage dating. When one talks about boyfriends or girlfriends in our current age, however, too often the emphasis is on the "boy" or "girl" rather than the friend.

Our young readers will also profit from reading one other valuable pamphlet available from the Metropolis of Boston:

In Defense of a Little Virginity

This pamphlet is filled with information and statistics on the terrible and incurable diseases that result from a promiscuous or "gay" lifestyle.

Unfortunately, our young people will not find or hear this information in the media, or even in the classroom. That's why this pamphlet fills an urgent need. Your health and your life may depend on it!

Write or email our Metropolis for more information on the pamphlets we have available:

MetEphraim@homb.org

Our mailing address is on the back of this pamphlet.

I often witness relationships fail because the couple is romantically involved before they get the chance to know one another. What do I suggest to teenagers as a substitute for dating? Be friends with members of the opposite gender, hang out, but do not call these social outings dates or think of these as such. Rather, think of these outings as an opportunity to deepen your friendships. Sooner or later, you will find yourself hanging out more and more with one particular friend, and this is much more likely to lead to a healthy marriage.

A Single Warning Suffices

While teenage boys are a little different, most adolescent girls I know do not set out in a relationship to lose their virginity. Rather, it happens in a moment of weakness, usually alone somewhere as the couple carouse, after the girl has incrementally yielded to a series of moral compromises. Therefore, I suggest teenagers give the object of their courtship one warning that they intend to save sexual intimacy until marriage.

If the suitor then puts pressure on you to compromise in this regard, ditch him or her immediately.

Again, this is both my tribunal experience and my pastoral experience with teenagers: If your suitor does not respect your Catholic morality even after you have warned him, either you will eventually give in or the relationship will eventually fail. More often than not, the result is both.

To explain, guys were originally expected to pay the girl's way because this offered an opportunity for the girl to judge the guy as a potential provider for the family. This was before our culture degenerated to the point where instant gratification may be purchased.

In short, quite often when a guy pays a girl's way, he unconsciously expects something by way of sexual gratification in return. Therefore, girls, pay your own way. If you do this, a guy is less likely to expect something in return. This also makes you more assertive, and thus more resistant, should a situation arise in which you are pressured to compromise your Catholic faith and morals.

On the other hand, in keeping with the spirit of the former custom, do not pay a guy's way. If he never has money, either because he has not earned it or because he cannot resist spending it, then he probably will not be a good provider in marriage.

Concluding Remarks

None of this advice is totally infallible. As long as human beings possess free will, and as long as our fallen natures tempt us to sin, like everyone else teenagers are free to choose between good and evil.

Nevertheless, when you are courting a potential spouse; these points will help you make the right decision by protecting you from situations in which it becomes easier to make the wrong decision.

slightest attention. Using the example of a teenage girl, the boyfriend will assure her he loves her, while asserting that nobody else will date her because she is overweight, unattractive, socially inept, or some other reason. If she does not wish to lose him, he states, she must prove her love for him by engaging in premarital sexual relations.

Granted, adolescence can be cruel for those whom Hollywood deems less than cosmetically perfect, but this usually passes by one's senior year, when many an ugly duckling becomes a beautiful swan.

Furthermore, God loves you, as does that special person whom God has chosen for you to marry, provided He has not called you to a higher vocation of the monastic life. Who does not love you is the potential suitor pressuring you to compromise yourself before marriage. So beyond the usual moral and religious issues, pause for a second and ask yourself why you would give yourself to a person who thinks you are an unattractive loser and who lies about loving you.

Go Dutch

This is the most controversial piece of advice I give teenagers looking to court. Granted, it goes against our established custom in North America, but it is also a piece of advice I received from a youth minister whose pastoral experience with inner-city youth ministry corroborates my experience on the tribunal. Thus, given our present cultural expectations, a little adjustment to the custom of courtship is warranted.

Adult Supervision

Stay near adults. In other words, go to movies, go out for dinner or coffee, but do so in a well-populated area where there are always adults nearby. You do not have to drag your mom along, but keep to public places. If your potential suitor wishes to talk privately, discussion can take place in a restaurant booth. If your potential suitor wants to go somewhere quiet with you, find a nice concert hall or museum.

You can talk privately and spend quiet time together in these places, because the people around you will not notice when you do exactly that—spend quiet time together and talk privately. The same people, however, will notice if this is not what you are doing. This is why you are infinitely less likely to morally compromise yourself when adults are nearby.

Zero Tolerance For Violence

One punch is one too many. If your potential suitor hits or physically abuses you once, it will happen again. In all my experiences dealing with marriage tribunals and youth apostolates, I have never seen physical abuse end with one incident, unless the victim ended the relationship after that one incident. So if you get punched, either get rid of the person immediately or prepare yourself for future abuse. Your potential suitor will say the violence was accidental because he was angry, and he may apologize, profess his love, and promise you it will never happen again.

He probably means it and intends to follow through. If he hits you once, however, he is not in control of his temper. Until he gets help and brings his temper under control, he is in no condition to court. Therefore, out of Christian charity you should forgive him; however, out of this same love you need to dump him and carefully tell him the truth: Until he gets counseling for his violent temper, he is not ready to court.

Just Say No

Learn to say no. This applies to any situation in which you believe your potential suitor is leading you to compromise your Catholic faith and morals. Again, most teenagers do not go out looking for compromising situations; rather these situations arise because adolescence is an awkward time when young people are trying to fit in, which leads to a certain group mentality taking over.

Be an individual, and learn to say no in awkward situations.

No Pornography

If your potential suitor is into pornography, either he ditches it or you ditch him. This may seem like a harmless activity, but from my tribunal experience I have come to realize just how unhealthy are the expectations pornography creates in marriage. It severely undermines the marriage covenant because one spouse looks upon the other as an object of pleasure, rather than as a spouse.

Quite often, the addicted spouse gets bored with the

other after a year or two, and as a result pressures the other spouse into doing the same things witnessed in those filthy magazines. . . .

Spiritually, pornography can, and often will, prevent a sacramental marriage from being entered into. In short, pornography creates mental, emotional, spiritual, and psychological barriers that prevent one spouse from totally giving himself over to the other. Pornography fragments the focus of one's sexual desire, and thus one no longer focuses exclusively on one's spouse.

Jesus Loves You

“Jesus loves you”: This is the most gentle way I could think of to introduce the subject of “fat and ugly” comments. Nevertheless, this is something I witnessed all the time as a teenager, as well as something I regularly come across in tribunal ministry. Many teenagers are pressured to compromise their moral virtue because their date tells them they are fat, ugly, goofy, or some other derogatory comment, which plays off adolescent insecurity.

Girls are particularly vulnerable to this tactic, especially when they come from one of the following backgrounds: abusive; few prior courting opportunities; previous difficult or unhealthy dating relationships; extreme insecurity about their looks which leads them to wonder whether any guy will find them attractive.

Often, such an adolescent becomes desperate to latch on to the first potential suitor who gives him or her the